

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR



[*The Editor is not responsible for opinions expressed in this Department.*]

DEAR EDITOR: As you have introduced and invited discussion on the subject of criticism and reform in the Army Nurse Corps, I would like to say a word in defense of the so-called "grumblers," and to give some of my experience in reform work.

Do you think it is quite fair for a visitor to judge of the justness or unjustness of criticisms, which have been made from the standpoint of actual work "in the ranks?"

Grumbling is an epidemic which is always prevalent in the army, and it is said to take three years to cure the disease and make a good soldier, but happily, the nurse, with her intuition and, occasionally, a good dose of philosophy, is able to apply the remedy in a much shorter time.

There is no other condition of life under the sun, which can compare with a military life. It is not bad, but peculiarly different from anything else and, although I came from one of the largest Training Schools in the country, and which boasts of its military discipline, yet I was wholly unprepared for the conditions of military life. I do not believe that military discipline can be taught in Training Schools.

There should be a post-graduate course in a military hospital, similar to the Preparatory Course in Washington for army surgeons, where nurses could receive instructions on army rules and regulations, and then enter the service with some knowledge of what is before them, instead of learning a rule by breaking it, as the private has to do.

The Presidio is at present the Preparatory School for Nurses, but during my service, and I think the same prevails now, not one word of military rule was taught there in class work.

You say, "what we need at present, is calm, deliberate common sense criticism from the nurses in the service."

I wonder if you realize just how difficult it is to criticise Uncle Sam?

In the first place, public criticism from any one in regular service is strictly against army rules and regulations, and official criticism, unless backed up with more or less "pull," almost loses its identity by

the time it travels twice the length of a "military channel," and it is most discouraging in its results.

Here is an example from my own experience: Two other nurses and myself, after completing our term of service in the Philippines, and receiving orders, signed by the Chief Quartermaster of the Department of the Philippines, for "First Class Transportation," were quartered "Third Class" on a crowded transport for one month, and after our arrival in San Francisco, and advised by the Chief Surgeon (the present Surgeon General U. S. A.), we made a calm, deliberate appeal, through military channels, to the War Department, for some action which would guarantee the future transportation of nurses "First Class," as transport rules up to that time left the matter wholly at the option of each Transport Quartermaster. The officer issuing the order, through courtesy, writes "First Class," and the officer executing the order, through lack of courtesy perhaps, or for want of room, makes it "Third Class" and shows you the "Blue Book," which is very convincing.

I never knew before how long a military channel was, and when, after several weeks, our papers were returned to us, accompanied by page after page of typewritten matter, completely exonerating the transport service, and with no prospect of reform for the nurse corps, I felt that *my* cure was complete, and that I should make no more criticisms "in the service."

Others, however, hammered away at the question, and in April, 1903, our point was gained and Mrs. Kinney informs me that "First Class Transportation" is actually printed in the "Blue Book." You have struck the key note, dear editor, when you recommend a reform of status or rank, as that would oil the machinery for any further reform.

It is said that the pay roll of the army determines the rank. For example, the nurse ranks with the non-commissioned officer because her salary is about the same. Now, if the War Department can so change its regulations as to make the Nurse Corps of equal rank with the commissioned officer in transportation, why can't it make the same special legislation for its nurses when they are dressed in uniform and working?

As an instance of *unofficial* criticism, I refer you to the request from the Presidio nurses to the Buffalo Convention in 1900, I think it was, which accomplished nothing but showers of disapproval from the War Department. After leaving the service in October, 1902, (having been nearly four years in the Nurse Corps), I made another effort

at reform, suggesting a uniform eight hour system of work which had already been proven satisfactory at some of the army hospitals.

Through influential parties, the communication reached the War Department and was turned over to the Superintendent of Nurse Corps, who said that all appeals for improvement must come through the chief nurses, reverting back to military channels, you see.

I believe that the surest and quickest road to reform would be through nurses in the service, long as it is, but I do think that they need the support of the great nursing body, which seems so distinctly separate from the Nurse Corps.

If some of our influential nurses could get into closer touch, individually, with members of the Nurse Corps, especially the chief nurses, they might get some good material to work upon, and you know public sentiment goes a long way towards influencing Uncle Sam.

The subject certainly demands the utmost caution and deliberation, as well as a thorough knowledge of army rules and regulations. I am glad that our editor is taking so active an interest in this branch of nursing, and I hope that many of our ex-army friends will take advantage of this opportunity to express their opinion on the various reforms which we used to long for.

ISABEL HARROUN, Ex-Army Nurse.

DEAR EDITOR: Your suggestion that we should "have a calm, reasonable discussion of the eligible volunteer list and the regular army service," has encouraged me to give my ideas concerning them, especially as I am an ex-army nurse.

First, as to the volunteer list: for obvious reasons institutional workers cannot be counted upon, which leaves it to be filled from the ranks of the private nurses. The requirements seem simple enough and easy to carry out—but are they? I have put in about eleven years at private work, and my experience is that it is a very uncertain life. We are here one day and gone the next. Then such a list recalls the absurd pictures we used to see of a nurse in costume with a bag in hand "always ready." How untrue to life and how unreasonable! Nurses are human beings and their profession does not cut them off, nor separate them from the duties common to other wage earners. They have their individual affairs to look after and often have to provide for some dependent relative.

Thirty-three years elapsed between the Civil War and our conflict with Spain, and the indications are wars will not be of frequent